

# TESTIMONY TO THE MICHIGAN HOUSE COMMITTEE ON SENIOR HEALTH, SECURITY AND RETIREMENT re HOUSE BILLS 5166, 5167 and 5168

By Penelope Pestle, member of the Reentry Roundtable of Kent County  
October 18, 2005

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Madam Chair and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing. My name is Penelope Pestle and I work, as a consultant and volunteer, on systems change projects in Grand Rapids. The project in which I am most engaged is called the Reentry Roundtable, a collaborative initiative of more than 50 organizations whose purpose is to reduce recidivism in Kent County, by providing wrap-around services to men and women reentering the community after incarceration. This initiative is one of the eight pilot sites for the Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative.

Our current law makes it difficult, if not impossible, for many people to enter the health care field if there is *any* prior criminal background. And health care is one of the fastest growing industry sectors in the state, with many openings for entry level employees. The health care industry will only continue to grow.

Clearly, those with violent pasts are not appropriate candidates for health care positions, however those convicted and imprisoned of check fraud or welfare fraud are treated in the same way as someone convicted of rape or aggravated assault under our current law.

We must ensure the safety of all patients in health care facilities, but at the same time, we must have employment options for non-violent ex-offenders to ensure that they can become contributing members of society. With the MPRI pilot, we are going to see more and more state ex-prisoners who are participating in reentry programming and are excellent candidates for rehabilitation, employment and advancement to self-sufficiency. **Health care positions after a waiting period** will provide options over time for this population of men and women, although ideally the waiting periods would be shorter.

In our experience, information in police and criminal justice records can be incorrect. The **opportunity to appeal** is an important aspect of the legislation that you are considering. It will allow a redress of an error that could have a negative impact on an individual for his or her lifetime.

And finally, let me comment on the provisions in this package of bills relating to those already employed and their ability to have **career mobility to other health care institutions** or adult foster care facilities without a criminal background check. Job and career mobility provide opportunity for individuals to achieve economic self-sufficiency. This provision is commendable and critically important.

Economic self-sufficiency for ex-offenders is a critical ingredient in reducing recidivism and ensuring that these men and women who have paid their debts to society can be contributing members of our communities.